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ABSTRACT

The booklet describes a multimedia project which introduces secondary students and interested adults to the ethnic history of Westport and Norwalk, Connecticut, from 1900 to 1979. Objectives of the project were to demonstrate ways to explore the past and relate it to the present, forge links between generations, encourage understanding and respect for various ethnic backgrounds, formulate a base for comparative study of cultures, and introduce students to a study of immigrant patterns. The document is presented in four sections. Section I outlines project goals, enumerates questions which the project seeks to answer, and describes methods. Specific project goals include documenting immigration patterns since 1900, investigating change in local ethnic populations, and developing ways in which schools and community groups can learn about local ethnic groups. Methods used include conducting research in libraries and local historical societies, interviewing community members, filming ethnic celebrations, and collecting ethnic materials. Section II presents a brief history of immigration patterns in the United States, 1900-1979. Section III provides an overview of immigration in the Norwalk-Westport area and discusses forces which held ethnic groups together. Section IV suggests learning activities to involve students in interviewing family and community members, listening to ethnic radio and television programs, making a study of terminology used at various times to refer to immigrants, compiling an ethnic cookbook, and listing ways in which American culture influences other nations. (DB)

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A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO AN ETHNOHISTORY OF THE WESTPORT-NORWALK AREA FROM 1900 TO TODAY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

by

Barbara Wilk
Project Director
The Westport-Weston Arts Council's Humanities Project

SO 011 510

Funded by the Connecticut Humanities Council, the State Committee of the National Endowment for the Humanities

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

"I believe that learning about our heritage...can clarify our view of ourselves and give us a more realistic understanding of what our capacities as a people are. While we are celebrating the different kinds of people who are Americans and the different things that Americans have done with song and dance and food, workways and playways, old traditions, new social inventions, we also are celebrating the diversity of human beings everywhere in the world."

Margaret Mead

The Westport-Weston Arts Council's project, "An Ethnohistory of the Westport-Norwalk area from 1900 to today" is a celebration of the diversity of human beings.

Funded by the Connecticut Humanities Council, the State Committee of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the project has been designed as a multimedia experience. Its aim is to involve students and the public in the ethnic history of Westport and Norwalk, a section of Southern Connecticut very rich in immigrant groups, ranging from the old and established to the very recent and as yet unsettled.

An audio-visual exhibition, based on research of the various ethnic communities, is to be mounted in the Weston Woods Caravan, a unique media-mobile that is designed to travel to local schools and groups. Through film, photography, music, oral histories and discussions, the project seeks to demonstrate ways to explore the past and make connections with the present, to forge links between generations, to encourage understanding and respect for one's own ethnic background and that of others and to formulate a base for a comparative study of cultures and a perception of the ingredients of a culture.

This ethnohistory project evolved from a search for a new approach to involve young and old alike in an exploration of history and cultures. We decided that, since the study of one's own roots is always fascinating, we would use a study of local ethnic groups as a way to develop an interest in the world around us as well as the rest of the world, its past, present and future.

Ours is an audio-visual presentation because we feel this is the most exciting way to reach students and to motivate them to continue the exploration of what it means to be an American.

This is a pilot project that we hope will prove useful for teachers and will give them new ideas for involving their students in the study of immigrant patterns, the development of cultures and history.

The project's goals are:

1. To document the immigration patterns since 1910.
2. To provide an overall picture of how the local ethnic populations have developed, changed and influenced the American culture.
3. To investigate how the immigrant cultures of this area have changed and adapted to suburban and urban environments.
4. To compare the experiences of the various ethnic groups.
5. To research the attitudes of ethnic groups and the attitudes towards ethnic groups.
6. To provide a forum to implement new ways to approach the problems of local ethnic groups and the new waves of immigration.
7. To develop a model for schools and communities.

The project has looked for answers to the following questions:

1. How have immigrant groups held together in the face of the dissembling influence of economic competition, divergence in occupation and the breaking up of local territorial enclaves?
2. Which groups remain coherent and which ones have blended with other groups or have been absorbed by the national culture?
3. What new symbols arise to bind groups together?
4. What role do the arts and crafts play as cultural foci?
5. What are the cultural contributions of the ethnic groups in the project area?
6. Is there still an ethnic diversity in the American culture?
7. If there is a significant cultural diversity, how can we best capitalize on it for the common good?

Methods used:

1. Research in libraries and historical societies. A review of primary and secondary sources.
2. Oral histories and conversations with as many representatives of the various ethnic groups as possible.

Methods used: (continued)

3. Filming of ethnic celebrations.
4. Study of ethnic music and dance.
5. Photographs and slides of ethnic families and how they live.
6. Search for and reproduction of photographs of the past.
7. Original music and poetry based on elements in our ethnic heritage.
8. Collecting ethnic materials: newspapers, records, lists of social clubs, radio shows, TV shows, etc.
9. Development of questionnaires for use by interviewers.
10. Survey of area schools and libraries to determine existence of ethnic programs.

Evaluation is essential to this project. The Connecticut Humanities Council has chosen to have an independent evaluator write a report on the project. Each participating teacher will receive an evaluation card. We welcome any suggestions. Members of our staff will be on the caravan every day to take notes on audience reactions.

The materials we have gathered in the course of the project - the pamphlets, photographs, slides, oral histories and film - are available to schools and libraries. For information, please telephone Barbara Wilk, Project Director, at 226-7669.

IMMIGRATION 1900 TO TODAY - A BRIEF HISTORY

It is impossible to understand immigration in the limited area of Westport and Norwalk without an understanding of national immigration patterns.

We have chosen the 20th century because it was the period of greatest growth and change for immigrant groups and because modern government in the United States started with President Theodore Roosevelt who, in 1901, in his first annual message to Congress, declared that the old political system would have to be changed to meet new social and economic problems.

1900-1910 saw the heaviest immigration in American history and Connecticut received many of them, particularly in its large cities. It was a period when one percent of the nation's families owned seven-eighths of its wealth, when the average worker spent 60 hours a week at work. Almost two million children worked in the fields or factories, frequently on night shifts. Many of those children were immigrants.

During this first decade of the 20th century there was great prejudice towards the immigrants, in spite of the fact that Roosevelt appointed members of minority groups to government positions. He wrote, "I have one Catholic in my Cabinet...and I now have a Jew...and part of my object in each appointment was to implant on the minds of our fellow Americans of Catholic or Jewish faith, or of foreign ancestry or birth, the knowledge that they have in this country just the same rights and opportunities as everyone else." The implantation did not take. The native American stock, particularly in New England, were afraid that they would be supplanted by immigrants. One reason prejudice existed was because the immigrants were willing to accept long hours and low wages, to fill industrial needs for "cheap labor." The so-called "nativists" also believed in the racial inferiority of some races. It was a time when blacks were not allowed on the stage in plays in which whites appeared; black parts were taken by white actors in black face.

The dependence of American industry on unskilled immigrant labor made it necessary to simplify and routinize factory work and this in turn led to automation and mass production. So, unwittingly, the unskilled, uneducated

immigrant became the pioneer in the production of mass culture.

Then, through this mass production and subsequent mass communication, the immigrants started to become assimilated into an urban, technological culture during the period between the two World Wars. However, the assimilation was never and has never become complete; what happened was that the society of the United States became more and more complex.

The deluge of immigration that stopped temporarily during World War I resumed in 1919. The combination of mass immigration and mounting unemployment led Congress to restrict annual immigration to 3% of the people born in a particular foreign area and resident in the United States in 1910. This restrictive law was passed in 1921 and within a year reduced immigration from a million a year to 300,000. But to nativists and organized labor, the number of undesirable immigrants still seemed too large, so they forced the National Origins Act of 1924 which set up a quota of 2% of the foreign-born of 1890 and established a Commission to work out quotas by a formula based on numbers of foreign-born over the whole range of the U. S. census data. The final report reduced southern and eastern European quotas to some 150,000 annually, excluded Orientals, and was enacted into law in 1929. The image of the United States as the open-armed symbol of liberty welcoming the foreign-born to her shores was destroyed.

The ending of mass immigration facilitated assimilation of the ethnic groups already in this country because they were deprived of constant large-scale reinforcements. Without large new groups to maintain and foster the parent culture, the minorities began to disperse. While the early immigrants tended to cluster together according to ethnic backgrounds, the prosperity of World War II enabled millions of second generation immigrants to move into the mainstream of American life. The rise of a large middle class saw occupation and economic position replacing ancestry as the foundation of social life. A larger and larger number of second and third generation immigrants married outside the parent group. A more pluralistic, heterogeneous pattern began to emerge as the effort to maintain an Anglo-Saxon American culture was, for the most part, abandoned.

There was a move to relax the restrictive immigration laws. The Acts of 1948 and 1950 enabled 410,000 people to come to the United States outside of the quota system. But national quotas did not come to an end until 1965. There was still a limit on total immigration numbers since no more than 20,000 could come from any one country. It did, however, do away with racism. And once again, the ethnic composition of immigration changed. There were more from the Mediterranean countries and Asia. Many of the new immigrants were of a different class from the uneducated groups of the early 1900s, since the 1965 Act reserved places for skilled professionals.

In spite of the relaxation of attitudes towards immigration and increased assimilation at home, a persistence and solidarity remains among the ethnic groups. Almost every ethnic group that has survived its formative encounter with American culture retains a loyal core which keeps it alive. In recent years there has been a renewed appreciation of the ethnic bond as a source of political power, as well as personal integration. Today many Americans are rebuilding ethnic identities or, like the Puerto Ricans, retaining and maintaining them. Instead of the ethnic distinctions being obliterated, they are being redefined.

RESEARCH RESULTS

We are not offering any settled conclusions. We are only introducing central problems and indicating what we have found out in answer to the questions raised by the project.

To begin with, we would like to define some of the terms used in this project.

Ethnic group: (This definition is that used by the World Education Project of the University of Connecticut.)

1. A socio-cultural minority group in a pluralistic society,
2. recruitment to which is based upon biological ties modified by individual, group or outsider perception of membership status, which maintains its boundaries by socio-cultural commonalities.

Ethnology:

The study of living cultures.

Culture:

The way of life of a society as seen through its arts, lifestyles, language, religion, social organizations, economics, politics, values, beliefs and education.

Our study has concerned itself with an exploration of those ethnic groups which have come in some numbers to Westport and Norwalk since 1900. Dr. John Mahar, Research Director of the project and Director of the Ethnic Center at Sacred Heart University, Bridgeport, has written a paper on the history of immigration in our target area.

I will deal here with the information we have collected through interviews and discussions with a neighborhood people, churches and organizations.

We have found that the immigrants in the Norwalk-Westport area have, in general, reflected the national patterns, facing the same prejudices, clustering in ethnic neighborhoods, assimilating but still maintaining an ethnic identity. The immigrant groups that seem to have held together best in the face of dissembling influences are those in South Norwalk - the Hungarians, the Italians, the Greeks and the Spanish-speaking.

Westport was always a very differnt community from Norwalk. In the early 1900s there were wealthy people in Westport who owned large estates and used the town as a summer resort. It had many more old-time Americans than Norwalk, little industry, few stores and families who sent their children to private schools. Norwalk was always a center for industry and shopping and was a true melting pot with immigrant groups from almost every country in Europe. As Westport developed from farm land and resort area into a wealthy suburb, it no longer attracted immigrants in sizable numbers except for the Jewish community which grew during the Hitler years and with the exodus of business and professional people from New York City. Norwalk, on the other hand, developed more and more industries during the war years and continued to attract immigrants, not only from Europe, but from Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, South America and the southern sections of the United States.

The immigrants of the period before the Second World War came to escape poverty, oppression or army service. First, the men in the family would come. Then the women would follow. They usually came to a place where they already had relatives or friends. For example, most of the Norwalk Italians came from the very small island of Ischia, while the Hungarians came from the same small villages near each other.

The early immigrant families were very close-knit, forming an extended family, with several generations living under the same roof, or at least close to each other, forming family enclaves. Even today their children tend to study, work and live in the area in which they were born and to maintain close family ties.

There was pressure on the ethnic groups of the first half of the century, both from within and without, to become Americanized as quickly as possible. They wanted to divest themselves of their unpleasant past, to lose their foreign culture and to merge with the native population. The schools taught only in English and offered only a traditional American, by-rote education. No foreign languages were taught until high school and these, right through the 1940s, were the traditional languages - French, Latin and, occasionally, Spanish. Both Norwalk and Westport had large Italian populations but no Italian was taught and there were no Italian

books or newspapers available in the libraries. The school leaving age was 14, and few of the immigrant groups went on to high school. They usually left school and went to work to earn money to supplement the meager income of their parents. Even those young enough to go to school had chores to do at home; supper was at 6 and bed at 7 o'clock. Children and parents worked long and hard and were able to survive on very little money. Almost everyone had a garden where they could grow food. Life was simpler and more structured than it is today.

Social life centered around the churches, the temples, the ethnic clubs or family gatherings. There were picnics, dances, vaudeville and, in the summer, the Chatauqua, sports events, carnivals and in the 1930s, the movies and the big band music at Noroton Point. There were few cars; transportation was by trolley, train and then by bus, so people did not travel great distances to visit or to find entertainment. Even though trolley fares were only 5 cents, there were many who could not afford the price and most of the children walked to school. Education concentrated on basics and since immigrant parents, as a rule, had great respect for schools and learning, their children could read, write and do mathematics even though they left school at an early age.

There was a strong sense of neighborhood, especially in South Norwalk, right up to the Second World War. The population of both communities was much smaller so the people were friendlier, knew each other and helped each other in time of need. There was no welfare program so they had to rely on each other.

The old-timers all have a tendency to fantasize about the past, about how much better it was than now. They miss the sense of community, of family closeness and of safety that they had when they were growing up.

Few of the early immigrant groups were highly skilled or well educated and do not seem to have had much involvement with the arts. The old-timers were held together by the common bond of a parent language and maintained their ties through social clubs where they ate ethnic food, danced ethnic dances and played ethnic music. The most pervasive element in all the cultures seems to have been food. Ethnic foods have remained long after other elements of the cultures have merged into the American mass media culture.

There is a general feeling that the early immigrants and their children have integrated well into American life, except for lingering feelings about past discrimination in housing, jobs and schooling. The newer groups have once again run into discrimination though certainly not on the level faced by those who arrived here before the Second World War.

There has been much more dispersal and assimilation of immigrant groups in Westport than in Norwalk, since there has been no new immigration to Westport and new immigration is vital to the coherence of a group and the maintenance of a culture. There are still Italian families in Saugatuck but the St. Anthony's Club is almost defunct, the statue of the Saint is stored in a cemetery crypt and the ethnic feast and parade no longer take place. The Thruway broke up homes, the big estates and large farms disappeared, and the local territorial enclave started to break up. As the children became more educated, they became more American and lost even their native language. The only other ethnic group of any size in Westport, the Jews, settled in this area primarily between the First and Second World War with the most significant influx coming after the Second World War. They came from Europe, New York City and other parts of the United States. It was the attraction of suburban life that brought the Jews to the Westport area. According to Rabbi Rubenstein of Temple Israel, most of his congregation are third-generation, those whose grandparents were immigrants. He says they are completely Americanized and he does not believe they are an ethnic group, but a group with a Jewish identity defined by religion. He says, "In suburban America, the synagogue is the best way for the Jew to reclaim his identity."

Both the synagogues and the churches are vital factors in holding together ethnic groups. The majority of Reverend Szabo's Hungarian congregation live within a mile of the church and it is the church that is the center of their social life, that keeps alive Hungarian Holy Days, music, dances and all the culture. The Greek Orthodox Church in Norwalk has 480 families and is growing. There are 8 Baptist churches in Norwalk that have black congregations totaling some seven thousand. The Roman Catholic Churches in Norwalk have mixed ethnic groups. A good example is St. Joseph's that has an Irish, Italian, French, Hispanic and Black congregation of some 1000 families, and offers a special Spanish Mass on Sundays.

In Norwalk the new immigrants, the Blacks and Hispanics, as well as the older immigrants, have been working to maintain their cultures. This interest has extended to the schools, social clubs, libraries and organizations.

The South Norwalk Branch Library has 800 children's books in Spanish as well as a few hundred adult books. There is a Spanish resource person at the library who compiles information on all services and conducts a Spanish-English activity hour Friday afternoons.

Three Norwalk schools participate in PDC, Project Developmental Continuity, a demonstration program in early education that operates through the Head Start program. PDC offers a bilingual/multi-cultural program in which the children receive their education in the language that, for them, is dominant. This program integrates all children socially and includes a sharing of national heritages in school activities within and outside of the classroom.

The Westport Library carries only 8 books in a foreign language and no foreign newspapers, but can locate foreign language books and deliver them to library users. The Staples High School language department offers Spanish, French, Latin, sometimes German and Russian, but no Italian. However, there is an "English as a second language course" given to all children who need to learn English before entering Staples.

Radio station WMMM has John LaBarca's popular "Italian Houseparty" on Sundays while Norwalk's WNLK has Hungarian, German, Italian, Spanish and Jewish programming on the weekends. More and more TV stations are offering foreign language programs. WTNH, Channel 8, has a Spanish and Black revue on Sundays from 2:00-2:30 p.m.

On the state level, the Connecticut Commission on the Arts has appointed a consultant for Hispanic cultural development as well as a consultant for neighborhood arts. The neighborhood consultant, Samuel A. Wright, Jr., who is an advocate of cultural pluralism, says, "The arts of the twenty-first century have already begun to flow from Native American, African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic artists who are coming together with European-Americans as professionals at the neighborhood level, cultivating their own classics, developing and expanding their own aesthetics to create a culturally plural environment for the living arts as yet not experienced in this country."

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Duplicate our model: Have children interview members of their families, draw family trees, bring in old photographs, do oral histories, and develop a presentation to illustrate all the ethnic heritages in the class.

Listen to ethnic radio shows and TV programs and interview local radio people, such as John LaBarca, Reverend Szabo, Steve Cenatiempo, and find out why they are doing the ethnic shows, what the material on the shows is and what kind of response they get from their audience.

Make a study of the terminology used in referring to immigrants, i.e., Yankee, Yellow Peril, nativist, etc.

How does it feel to be an immigrant? Write plays about an immigrant group in 1902, 1930, 1950.

What is it like not to be able to communicate? Have children divide into groups and have each group invent a language to communicate a given event. Have them speak to each other, without gestures, to see if one can understand the other. Then, have them communicate with gesture and sign language. Have them communicate with drawings. Have them, all together, invent a language.

Do the history of a parent culture. How much of the original culture did the immigrants bring with them? How much remains? Why was some of it lost?

What are the ingredients of contemporary American culture? What are the influences from immigrant cultures: German, Jewish, Italian, Spanish, Black, etc.? Look at language, food, housing, social behavior, religions, education, life styles, arts, politics, social clubs, economics, values, beliefs.

Make a study of where ethnic groups worship and/or meet socially. Dances, music, dating patterns. Importance of churches and clubs?

Design a questionnaire for a variety of interviews. Must decide on goals for any individual project in order to develop questions.

Look back through local papers since 1900 for examples of their attitudes regarding immigration and immigrant groups.

Recreate an ethnic celebration. Do a study of the various ethnic celebrations.

As an art project, do drawings and bring in photographs of clothing from 1900 to today. How does clothing reflect the society?

Learn how to play some ethnic games. Have a member of an ethnic group in your community come to class and discuss and demonstrate games.

Prepare a map and tour guide of sites connected with ethnic American history in Westport and/or Norwalk.

Study transportation since 1900 and how it affected immigrant life in your community. Draw maps showing transport in 1910, 1930, 1978.

Make maps of open land in 1910, 1930, 1978. How did the dwindling of open space affect the lives of immigrant groups?

Make maps of factories where immigrants worked starting in 1900 and show where they work now and for how much.

Having studied impact of foreign cultures on American life, make lists of ways in which American culture influences other countries today.

A study of entertainment since 1900 and how it has influenced the culture, particularly the immigrant cultures.

Compare the in-migration groups, the Puerto Ricans and Blacks with European immigration of the past.

Make time lines showing immigration waves since 1900 and what was happening in the world at that time. Why did they come to the U.S.?

Compare prices, salaries, food, rent, clothing, transportation, starting in 1900 and ending with the present. Choose an immigrant worker and see how his values would have changed.

Explore present day multicultural relations in your community. Are there still problems of communication, prejudice, exploitation? What is being done to help immigrants?

What cultures did the people of your community come from? Investigate and compare the parent cultures.

Make crossword puzzles containing only words of foreign origin.

Put together an ethnic cookbook based on recipes students get from their families. Have a feast!

Make a study of the laws that affect immigrants. What does one do to become an American citizen? What about illegal immigrants?

Write a poem based on an ethnic object or celebration.

Choose a country from which immigrants came to your neighborhood. Make a map of the country. Find out when and why people left their home country and what kind of people they were.

Collect information about all the foreign-made products available in your community.

Using an English dictionary, try to determine how many words have a foreign origin and what was the country of origin.

Do a comparison of Norwalk and Westport. Why did Norwalk develop as a multicultural city and Westport as a bedroom, commuter suburb?

Do ethnic neighborhoods still exist? Made a study. Show where they are, with maps, their population and why they persist.

Collect ethnic publications available in Connecticut and compare their viewpoints with those of local papers and magazines.

Make a study of the family life of one or more ethnic groups. How does the family structure differ from the family life of students? How has the family changed since 1900?

CREDITS

Project Staff:

Barbara Wilk	Project Director
Dr. John Mahar	Research Director
Alice Walton	Fiscal Agent
Alberta Eiseman	Consultant, oral historian
Paul McGuirk	Photographer, oral historian
Janet Kyff	Cover designer, oral historian
Anthony D'Amico	Research writer
Diane Graham	Video tape artist, film editor
David Price	Filmmaker
Joanne Cushing	Filmmaker
Mimi Fox	Musician
Ina Wilde	Poet
Myrna Meltzer	Researcher
Henry Lyman	Publicity

Humanities Scholars:

Dr. John Mahar	-	Director of the Ethnic Center, Sacred Heart University, Bridgeport, CT
Dr. Bertram Spiller	-	Dean of Sociology Department, University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT
Dr. Estelle Feinstein	-	History Professor, University of Connecticut, Stamford Branch, Stamford, CT
Ms. Alberta Eiseman	-	Author, Westport, CT

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Background material from: "The Peoples of Connecticut, Multicultural Ethnic Heritage Series," available from The World Education Project, U-32, School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06268. The World Education Project also has ethnic resource kits and a Teachers' Manual, "Learning about the Peoples of Connecticut," by Patricia S. Weibust, Associate Professor, Educational Anthropology, Assistant Director of the Project. The Project Director was Frank A. Stone.